



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 97

DON'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN - THE RISK MANAGEMENT HABIT

This Flag Voice is about avoiding injuries and property damage in your personal lives as well as on duty. I recently received an E-mail from a member that gave a candid first person account of how he mangled his finger in his lawnmower. As he tells the story, he had been diligently following a number of safety rules as he went about his chores for most of the weekend, but, in a momentary lapse of sound judgment, he used his hand to lift a guard to clear clogged grass from beneath his still-running power mower. Thirty stitches, a crushed bone and a lost fingernail later, he generously told his story so that others might avoid his mistake. What struck me most about his story was his frank admission that he was thinking "turn off the engine, turn off the engine" as he reached down to clear the grass. To me this means that he had instinctively started the risk management process. Unfortunately, he did not carry it through to its conclusion before the blade sliced and diced his finger.

In contrast to private sector employers, the Coast Guard assumes a high degree of responsibility for its people (all workforces) even when they are away from their workplaces. This provides us with a unique challenge as well as an opportunity. The challenge is that we have to address many risks in addition to those that are encountered on the job. The opportunity is that we have a single tool that can help us manage all those risks, and we can get very proficient in its use if we practice it 24 hours a day, if we make its use a continual habit.

Probably all of us have taken chances similar to the one just described. Many have taken much greater risks and escaped unscathed. We have all been there, both on-duty and off-duty. To help put the matter into a personal context, consider these questions:

How many times have you performed a task in a way you knew was unsafe, but you rationalized the unsafe behavior by telling yourself you were only going to do it one time, or only for a short time, or thinking that "it" just would not happen to you?

How many times have you taken a short cut, hurried a task, ignored proper procedures, neglected to use proper tools or safety equipment, or failed to read or follow instructions?

How many times have you performed activities requiring your undivided attention but allowed distractions?

How many times have you undertaken activities and not considered your personal physical limitations or environmental conditions?

How many times have you truly assessed the risks of hazards in your own homes, including fire and electrical hazards, power tools, tripping and falling hazards, and even ergonomics?

The answers to these questions will probably suggest a greater need for risk management in your personal as well as your professional lives. We know from our analysis of reported mishaps that:

Most mishaps involve factors that at least at one time were under the direct control of the personnel involved.

Hazards were sometimes masked by the familiarity born of routine tasks or normally secure environments.

Operational risk management (ORM) processes were unknown or not used.

The ORM process was used but unnecessary risks were accepted.

The Challenge: Many on- and off-duty mishaps are the result of slips, trips, falls, pinching/cutting fingers and hands, strains, and using tools. These are routine, individual activities. It seems paradoxical that we have compiled a relatively good safety record while engaged in the potentially hazardous situations our missions sometimes demand, but we injure ourselves with alarming frequency performing more mundane tasks. I believe this is at least partially due to a higher level of focus, situational awareness, teamwork, and deliberate risk management during our operational activities. I am also amazed that many of the personnel involved in mishaps knew they were placing themselves at unnecessary risk but continued, in spite of their reservations, on to the unfortunate conclusion. Though it is disheartening to see people recognize a hazard yet forge ahead hoping for a lucky outcome, I also find encouragement in these findings because there is evidence that the essential first element of risk management is already in place, hazard identification.

We Have the Tools: What was often referred to in the past as "common sense" or "thinking ahead" has now evolved into a process known as operational risk management, a tool that can be applied to any situation. In fact, use of operational risk management is Coast Guard policy, as described in Commandant Instruction 3500.3 of 23 November 1999. ORM is a continuous, systematic process of identifying and controlling risks in all activities. The principles of ORM are to accept no unnecessary risks, to accept necessary risks only when benefits outweigh potential costs, to make risk decisions at the appropriate level, to use ORM in planning and executing all activities, and to adapt the ORM process to changing conditions. The ORM process itself consists of seven steps:

The Operational Risk Management Process:

Identify the tasks.

Identify the hazards.

Assess the risks.

Identify the options.

Evaluate risk versus gain.

Decide on a course of action including measures to control risks.

Monitor the situation, changing controls if necessary.

Coast Guard training, policies, procedures, and command structure combine to promote and enforce the application of ORM in the performance of our missions. Why are these principles often ignored off-duty? What is the missing link?

The Link - The Risk Management Habit: We need take ORM to the next evolutionary step, to make ORM every individual's habit, almost an instinct. Ideally, this habit would apply to all activities, at all times, on and off-duty. Stephen R Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, defines a habit as the intersection of knowledge (what to, why to), skill (how to) and desire (want to). He believes effective habits are internalized principles and patterns of behavior. To avoid mishaps away from the workplace, we must bridge that geographic boundary between the cutter, flight line, or shore facility and the sites of our off-duty activities. We must educate and encourage our members to intersect their operational risk management knowledge, skills and desires at all times. We must evolve ORM from a Commandant Instruction and an occupational process into an individual habit of every member, a continual internalized pattern of behavior without regard for location, activity or duty status.

Personal risk management may take only seconds as we change our personal probabilities for safe outcomes by choosing the proper tools, donning the proper personal protective equipment, buckling up a seat belt, or shutting off machinery before working on it. Or It may require some additional time such as properly planning for a trip or a home remodeling project. It may require continuing evaluations and adaptations to changing conditions. It may require stopping an activity until safer options can be found. But we must remember that this time taken is time-proven to prevent mishaps.

The Opportunity: The more risk management is practiced, the more of a habit it becomes and the more effective it will be. Emphasis on practicing risk management in off-duty activities will benefit our on-duty risk management as well. The habit will become a behavior without boundaries. Everyone should follow the advice RADM Brown gave in MLCA's Memorial Day safety message: "Don't let your guard down." Don't lower your risk management guard when you are off-duty and don't let your (Coast) Guard down by becoming a casualty while accepting unnecessary risks.

Regards, FL Ames



[Flag Voice Contents](#)

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